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Selling Diversity: The Politics of Representation in Global Advertising

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Article Information

DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200036

Subject Category: [Linguistics](#)

Volume/Issue: [9/12](#) | **Page No:** 393-404

Publication Timeline

Submitted: 2025-12-10

Accepted: 2025-12-18

Published: 2025-12-31

Abstract

This study meticulously examines the racial and cultural ramifications associated with Thailand's 2013 Dunkin' Donuts "Charcoal Donut" advertisement, which incited international indignation due to its visual resemblance to blackface. This study utilizes Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the visual representation of race and identity, and the ways in which these representations either uphold or challenge dominant social constructs. Data were obtained from the advertisements and augmented by secondary sources, including international news reports, scholarly analyses, and audience reactions on social media. The analysis shows that the advertising uses language that is both inclusive and nationalistic, but its visual design focuses on light-skinned images and follows traditional Thai beauty standards for colourists. Audience views show a difference between how people in different cultures saw the picture: some thought it was stylish or original, while others thought it was racist because it used blackface. At the macro social practice level, the advertisement reinforces the concept of "Thainess," which promotes unity and a shared identity while obscuring the systemic disadvantages experienced by ethnic minorities. The study contributes to the existing academic discourse on global advertising by illustrating how multicultural narratives are selectively adapted to align with local contexts, thereby negotiating and normalizing prevailing power dynamics. It emphasizes the importance of culturally informed and ethically sound representation methods in international marketing.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis; Representation of race; Colorism; Global advertising; Thainess ideology; Media ideology and identity.

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